

PUBLISHER'S ROLE IN PROMOTING AUTHORS

—R.K. MURTHI*

The first reaction of a publisher, before whom I make a reference to this subject, is one of shocked surprise. He throws up his hands saying, "You mean we publishers have to promote authors? Does it imply that authors need protection, backing, patronage? If so, is it not a negation of the concept, to which Darwin gave expression, centuries ago, that only the fittest survive?"

Get it, my friend? Authors must struggle to find their feet in the world of literature. They must go through the ordeal of fire to establish themselves. Only when they are famous do we find it easy to sell their books. We are in this trade to earn a reasonable return for our investment. We are in business. And, in this line, as elsewhere, it is the trademark that counts. The aspiring author must get his trademark established by his own efforts. Then he will find our doors open. No, my friend. I as a publisher, see no role for our tribe in promoting authors."

In a way, his reaction is typical of the way of thinking of most publishers. Even in developed countries, like Britain and America, publishers are very choosy in picking up manuscripts for publication from new entrants to the field. They reserve the major part of their publishing programme to cover books by well-known authors. Yet, occasionally, they find, among the stream of manuscripts which come to them from new authors, something that stands out as exceptionally good. There are also publishing houses, which having turned down a manuscript, rued their mistake because the manuscript was picked up by another intrepid publisher and hit the headlines as one of the best sellers of all times, running into several editions and even bringing in cash in the form of serialisation rights, filming rights etc. Such books are few and far between. Yet, every year, a select hand of novices joins the ranks of the well-known, because some publishers are willing to take on the challenge of introducing talented new entrants.

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This, in my view, is the first and prime role of the publisher. I do not question his business acumen. I admit he is in the business to make a reasonable profit. I am even willing to go along with him when he argues that the sales efforts he has to make to sell books by established authors are much less than those required if he is to promote a new author. However, he must realise that he cannot emerge as a truly leading publisher unless he tries out a balanced blend of the well-known and the not-so-well-known authors. This is a risk he must take if he is not to miss the chance of reaping the benefits which will be his, once the new comer whom he encourages becomes the darling of the reading public.

Mercifully, these days, there is a growing awareness in literary circles of the vital role that publishers can play in promoting authorship. Yet, both authors and publishers still seem to have reservations. There is an undercurrent of animosity in their mutual dealings. Both know that neither can progress without the other, that the publisher needs authors even as the author needs publishers, that they have to stick together if they are to survive. It is this common interest which keeps both sections alive and kicking, though, at times, they hurl punches and blows at each other. I consider such an exhibition of inane fury as a storm in a tea cup just like domestic tiffs which blow off soon enough. For, the bond between the publisher and the author is akin to the marital relationship. Hitherto, the publisher, by and large, had been dictating terms. (Just like man of the house). But, of late, there has been a sort of liberation from convention. And the equation has become a little less biased.

While this reflects the situation as it exists today, most publishers, at least those who publish books for children, are not conversant with the steps they should take to promote good authors. Even those pub-

lishers who admit that they have to identify fresh talent, who are willing to try out titles by new authors, even if they are getting published for the first time, do not know how to go about searching for talent. They are willing to play their role if only they can be given some guidelines in this direction. That I consider a positive sign.

I do not claim to be the ultimate authority on the subject. What I set down below to help the publisher identify fresh talent are the ideas which I have picked up from some of the leading publishers of children's books, with whom I have had interaction. In a way, all that follows are the ideas which have come to me from the publishing community. You could say I am trying to sell wares produced by the publishers. I am just a medium through which the experiments conducted by the publishing houses which have made it big in the field of children's literature are held up for emulation by other publishers. And much of what is said about publishers of children's books in identifying fresh talent is valid with regard to books of other genres too. That ought to set at rest any fears that I am trying to talk through my hat. That ought to lend support to the comments which follow the validity which is needed to draw the attention of more and more publishing houses to the need to promote new young authors by adopting a well-laid strategy.

The strategy has many facets. A few of the more significant ones are discussed here.

1. *Identifying new talent*

A good beginning in this direction, has been made by some publishing houses in Delhi. The lead has been taken by the Children's Book Trust. The Trust holds annual competitions for authors. The categories of books in which the Trust is interested, are

clearly defined. The Trust looks forward to books for all age groups, without imposing any limits on the subjects to be covered. The manuscripts which it seeks range from picture books for the very young to adventure stories to informative books, apart from history and science for older age-groups. The basic idea behind the competition is simple. The Trust is keen to provide children with excellent reading. This is the yardstick by which every entry for the competition is judged. Here there are no imbalances between the recognised authors and the novices. Names do not matter. Instead, it is quality that counts.

A similar approach is adopted by the National Book Trust (NBT), and the National Council of educational Research and Training (NCERT) to identify fresh talent. More and more publishing houses should take the cue and adopt similar techniques to spot talent. Those publishing houses, whose resources are limited can, once gifted young writers have been identified through national competitions held by the CBT, NBT or NCERT, call them to be their authors. They can thus open up more opportunities to the youngsters who have proved their worth through national competitions. Or, some of them can join hands, find the finance to hold such competitions and thus, identify fresh talent which they can promote.

Here I must make mention of Ratna Sagar, a publisher of Delhi. Its Managing Director maintains regular contact with the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, giving encouragement to new authors and illustrators with tested merit. When more and more publishers join hands to promote fresh talent, the world of

children's books will become flush with good books, fascinating books, well-written, beautifully illustrated and produced to catch the eye of the child at first glance.

2. *Good Editors*

Most publishing houses, sadly enough, do not have good editors. This is more so when it comes to publishers of children's books. The belief still lingers on that the manuscript of a competent author does not need editorial pruning. This is a wrong notion. The author is a creative worker. He has the imagination to spin out imaginative texts. Yet often enough, he flies high with his fancies. He forgets much of himself and his settings when he dates the muse. During these moments of interaction with the febrile mental process of creation, he is swept off his feet. At times, he gets some facts wrong. Or he forgets the limits set by the publishing house for the text. Occasionally, his grammar and syntax and use of words show some flaws. The dialogues which he introduces may need a little pruning. The chapters, where necessary, may have to be recast. These are the areas where the editor can play a vital role. The editor is the rudder. He has to introduce the necessary mid-stream correction. Every author has certain pet subjects, some preferred words, a few stylistic mannerisms. These are what the good editor sports readily.

It is accepted by some of the all-time greats, including Arthur Clarke and Asimov, that during their first date with science fiction, they received immense tips from their editors.

The need to induct a band of competent editors of children's literature has not yet been fully realised. Most of

the competent editors who now hold the fort have proved what editors can do when it comes to evening out the angularities in the manuscripts and in trimming and cutting the texts so that the final product gains in quality. This 'finishing touch' is what finally transforms the manuscript, which is really good, into something that is par excellence in every way. Experienced, sensitive editors can perform 'cosmetic surgery' on every manuscript which comes to them. It is time all publishing houses accepted this role of the editor and helped raise a band of editors who can serve the cause of good literature for children and thus help authors gain acceptance, not only within the country but outside as well.

3. *Right Themes*

Choosing the right themes cannot be left to the author alone. There are diverse fields of development which demand attention. While writers are fully aware of the changes, they are not always aware of the potential market of books on the new developments. Here too, the publisher can play a vital role. He has the resources to organise market surveys. He can meet librarians, both at school and college levels. He can interact with teachers from the primary school upwards. He can, during his meetings, find out the themes and topics on which books for various age-groups are either not available or are inadequate with respect to both quality and quantity. Such assessments, if carried out periodically, would prove immensely beneficial. Here, I may point out the leading role played by the Children's Book Trust. In order to serve the cause of equality of the sexes, the Trust held a competition, in collaboration with the UNICEF,

with a declared theme of equality between boys and girls. The response from children's writers to this competition was enthusiastic.

This year, taking note of the fact that protection of the environment is a burning issue, the Trust has set this as the theme for the annual competition. The NBT has invited illustrators to come up with suitable picture books to bring out the greatness of Pandit Nehru, whose birth centenary celebrations are now on.

However, publishing houses which identify themes and then go about identifying good books on the themes can be counted on one's fingers. Perhaps, most publishers in India choose to wait for the author to find out, on his own, the right theme and then come to them. They do not act as catalysts in serving the cause of good literature. They have, so far, failed to realise how much they can do to get the best out of the authors by taking the lead in suggesting suitable subjects and then encouraging the authors to work on them. They could commission established authors to produce books on the chosen themes. Or they could hold competitions. Hopefully, this Seminar should induce them to give up their reservations and take a greater interest in identifying themes and then inspiring the authors to try their hand at books on the selected themes.

4. *Visual Impact*

Good illustrations make books, specially for the very young, come alive. It is a matter of pride for us to note that we have good illustrators in our midst. They have also won awards from international jury.

However, publishers by and large, treat illustrations as frills which have

no major role to play in the scheme of books production. Often enough, they are content to engage illustrators whose calibre is sub-standard. Since top illustrators demand financial rewards commensurate with their excellence, and many publishers choose to save on illustrations, many good books for children fail to make the grade. Children shy away from the books that are not visually catchy. This was brought home to me when I assessed some books in Tamil. Some of the books provided interesting reading. Yet the illustrations were of dubious quality. This, I realised, was a major blow to the authors of the books. The penmen had done an excellent job, yet their labour had been diluted by dull, drab illustrations. Often enough, the illustrations were not only badly done, but bore little relation to the text.

Further, printed on poor quality paper, these illustrations looked like ugly blotches. Publishers must realise the great harm that is done to good authors when the texts get devalued due to sub-standard illustrations. One can find no justification for poor quality illustrations when we have first rate artists, who can hold their own among the top illustrators of the world. Publishers must involve author, editor and illustrator, and be willing to allot adequate funds to enthuse the illustrator to join the venture with spirit. Only then will we get good books with interesting texts and beautiful illustrations. And since the front cover is what first draws attention, since it is the illustrator who makes the cover design, publishers cannot treat the visual aspect as something of secondary importance. Only when illustrations receive the attention they deserve, will authors receive the full rewards for their labour. This

fact cannot, should not be missed by publishers, if they are keen on promoting authorship.

5. *Remunerations*

It must be realised that authors too must live. Writing is their trade whereby they must earn. A good author deserves full backing from the publishers. However, most publishers, without realising the damage done to the cause, choose to cut down the remuneration payable to the author as well as the illustrator. Most publishers choose to make one-time payment to the author and purchase full rights on the text. The book may run into any number of editions. Tens of thousands of copies of the book may be sold. Yet the author gets nothing beyond the one-time payment. This is a situation not conducive to good authorship. After all, the basic starting point of the book is the author. It is only fair that he gets what is due to him. Perhaps, publishers could take the initiative and agree to give to the author, for every subsequent edition after the first, some share in the profits from the sales. This is a change which every author hopes for. This is yet another field where the initiative rests with the publishers.

6. *Production Strategy*

Good texts and excellent illustration by themselves do not lead to best-selling books. If the paper used is of poor quality, the book fumbles. If the editorial control exercised is not up to the mark, the printer's devil plays havoc with the book. The layout strategy, if not planned with care, takes away from the total impact of the book. If the front jacket is not impressive, the book, however good its content, fails to in-

spire. There are problems here. The cost of paper is spiralling and yet, books for children have necessarily to be priced low. These two requirements run at cross purposes. Any conciliation, which can be worked out between the two contradictory demands, holds the key. Only when the print order is substantial can the publisher hold the price line and still maintain quality. It is here that the publisher has to give due attention. He has to do his bit to expand his market, to identify new, as yet unexplored pockets of readership, take the books to a larger audience by means of a sales network. Several methods are available to publishers. These include a pre-publication offer at substantial concession, if the payment is made in advance. This is done by several language publishers, specially in Kerala. Special book fairs can be held at remote towns. Several publishers may have to join hands for that purpose. Direct mailing list of publications, on the pattern of book clubs in the West, taking the author around to autograph books which are bought at the book exhibition can also be planned. These are some of the methods through which larger sales targets can be achieved. And only when larger sales are ensured can quality be maintained, while keeping the price within

reasonable limits. This is one area where publishing houses have taken some steps, but what has been done so far is sporadic and not systematic. We, as authors, hope that in time to come, publishers would manage to expand their sales, have larger print orders and thus be in a position to pay fair remuneration to authors and illustrators.

That, in brief, tells us how the publishers can serve the cause of good authorship. It is gratifying to note that there are publishing houses in India which have adopted some, if not all, of the suggestions listed in this paper. There is a greater awareness among publishers that quality production brings rewards to the authors and the illustrators in some measure, while the organisations gain substantially due to increased sales and the resultant recognition as publishers of merit.

In the ultimate analysis, book production is an exciting activity where the author and the illustrator have a vital role to play, but they depend entirely on the publisher to take the creative product to the target audience. When it comes to books, there are four main pillars: the author, the illustrator, the publisher and the target audience. Only when all the four feel that they have got their due can children's literature get enriched.

All books for children are written with good intentions.